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MUSIC AND DRAMA

SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS OF THE MONTH

A Masterly Study of a Type (A Belated Appreciation).—A New Comic Opera after Molière: Signor Wolf-Ferrari's "L'Amore Medico"

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It is to be supposed, and indeed hoped, that we are gradually in this country developing a theater of national types: types that are humanly and naturally, not conventionally and artificially, American—types that are not designed after the familiar patterns of the theatrical outfitters. It is not often, to be sure, that one discovers in our contemporary theater a dramatic portrait that is unmistakably and vividly of our own time and place; but occasionally that most delightful and meritorious encounter takes place—and it takes place, we believe, more frequently than it did.

It will always be among our most poignant regrets that chance and circumstance prevented our seeing, during more months than we like to think of, one of the most masterly studies in characterization that our stage has shown in many a month. We mean the comedy that has been made out of Mr. Montague Glass's "Potash and Perlmutter" stories, and that has been playing to ecstatic audiences for many weeks at George M. Cohan's Theater.

The extraordinary effect of reality and pungent truth which the piece conveys is due partly, of course, to the triumphs of observation, insight, sympathy, humor, and vivid delineation which Mr. Glass achieved in his stories; but even more is it due to the superb characterizations of the two partners, Abe Potash and Mawruss Perlmutter, by Mr. Barney Bernard and Mr. Alexander Carr. Granted that the play itself, as a piece of dramatic construction, as an action, does not stand upon a very high level of artistic excellence, with its numerous strokes of sentimental melodrama and obvious farce. But it is made into something very real and

exceptional and delightful by the complete fidelity and surpassing veracity of the two chief impersonations. The Abe and Mawruss of Mr. Bernard and Mr. Carr are genuine creations, two of the most brilliant and engrossing pieces of dramatic characterization that we have ever seen. They have stepped straight from the New York of our day. They are unmistakable—their reality, their pungent and racy naturalness, are enormous. Let no supercilious observer turn up his nose at the broad humors and the frankly sentimental appeals of this remarkable production. The unslumbering keenness, the shrewd sagacity, the loyalty, the deep and rather shamefaced tenderness, the temperamental force, of these wonderful people are denoted with inimitable art. We should be at a loss to point to a current impersonation more authoritative yet restrained than Mr. Carr's, more richly comic than Mr. Bernard's.

Mr. Swinburne once observed, with that sulphurous vehemence which makes his excursions in æsthetic appraisal so incomparably diverting, that there is a certain kind of literary tribunal "whose judgments are dictated by obsequious superstition and unanimous incompetence. When certain critics inform a listening world that they do not admire Marlowe and Webster—they admire Shakespeare and Milton—we know at once that it is not the genius of Shakespeare, but the reputation of Shakespeare, that they admire. It is not the man that they bow down to; it is the bust that they crouch down before." Surely we all—all those of us whose task (gratuitous enough, no doubt!) it is to form opinions concerning artistic phenomena—may pray to be delivered from that category; though the recognition of an excellence that is untrumpeted is so exhilarating a pastime that one wonders at the common hesitancy in indulging it. Is it that we are afraid to extol a beverage unless the name of a famous producer is blown in the bottle? Or are we too constantly haunted by that ever-present danger that the discovered swan may, after all, be only a goose? Potash and Perlmutter, and Mr. Bernard and Mr. Carr, have not, of course, been denied fame; but is it based upon just the sort of appreciation that is requisite?

It is said that ladies have died for love (there is no need to quote here Shakespeare's contemptuous remark concerning the erotic mortality of the *other* sex); but if they have,

it must have been far back in some romantically fabulous past; for are they not in our day too busy, too profoundly concerned with more important matters, to "pay their final tribute to nature"—as Lamb called it—in any such gorgeously poetical fashion? However, we have it on the authority of Pascal that "*le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*"—so perhaps it is not so impossible, after all. But at least it is certain that Lucinda was dying of love—or, if it was not quite so bad as that, her adoring father, the plutocratic Arnolfo, feared that such was the case. Lucinda lived with her father in a splendid villa near Paris, in the days of Louis XIV.; and because Arnolfo saw that she was pining and pale and depressed, he showered upon her toys and trinkets and finery, even dolls; for he was not yet aware that she had ceased to be a child, and that her thoughts were no longer of dolls and music-boxes, but the very old and very trite thoughts that have perturbed adoring parents since the first love-song floated across primeval hills. In short, Lucinda loved young Clitandro, a cavalier. But they had not yet exchanged any of what Mr. Henley called "those sovran privacies of speech," for the simple reason that Clitandro, likewise enamoured of her, did not know that his love was requited. He had sung her a serenade outside the garden wall, but Lucinda's heart had turned to water at the sound of the beloved one's voice, and she had been unable to respond. So we might have had to take as a motto for this tale the haunting plaint of the greatest of sonneteers:

O how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of battering days?

But summer lives on in the hearts of Lucinda and Clitandro, and indeed waxes amorously ecstatic; for naturally Lucinda finds a way to know her lover better—or, rather, Lucinda's maid does. For in Enrico Golisciani's libretto to Signor Wolf-Ferrari's opera, "*L'Amore Medico*," in which this amiable action unfolds, there are the familiar characters of operatic comedy: the shrewd and scheming maid, the thick-witted, elderly dupe (in this case Lucinda's parent), the disguised lover. So it comes to pass that Lisetta, the wily and dauntless maid, invents for Arnolfo's ears an alarming tale of Lucinda's illness; a quartet of learned doctors are hastily summoned (and here, after the fashion of

L'Amour Médecin, upon which Golisciani has based his libretto, we are treated to some of Molière's favorite horse-play with the profession of medicine); and, after their incompetence has been demonstrated, Clitandro, the lover, masquerading as a younger and more resourceful healer, gets "the case," to his own and his beloved's complete satisfaction: for he tells the distracted Arnolfo that his daughter's trouble is, after all, a simple one, easily cured:

Semplicissimo!
 Il male sta nell' anima.
 Una maligna ubbia!
 Un chiodo! Un' ossessione:
 Volersi maritare!
 Poveretta! Che voglia malinconia!
 Si può esser più grulli di così?

In other words, Lucinda's trouble is merely that she thinks she wants to be married; and Clitandro, to oblige, will undertake to cure this distressing malady by marrying the lady himself—it will be, he assures the anxious Arnolfo, merely a bogus wedding, and so Arnolfo consents. Of course we are not at all surprised when, in the midst of the wedding festivities, the lovers quietly disappear, leaving the unsuspecting Arnolfo dancing to the music of their marriage feast.

This diverting little fable—consummately performed last month at the Metropolitan Opera House—is an excellent one for the purposes of operatic comedy; and, up to a certain point, Signor Wolf-Ferrari is just the man to write music for it. He had already, in his "*Le Donne Curiose*" and "*Il Segreto di Susanna*," displayed an exceptional gift of humor. We can think, indeed, of no living musician—among those who write for the theater, at least—who has so delicate a sense of comedy, and so easy a mastery of its musical utterance. In his two earlier comedies he worked with material that was extremely slight—that was, in fact, trivial—and which left one uncomfortably resentful at the thought of its alliance with music so artistic and so skilful as he had provided for it; for we have a stubborn and doubtless perverse conviction that music should be reserved for finer issues than those involved in mere farce. But in this pretty comedy after Molière there is much that is fit subject-matter for musical expression. There is, chiefly, the passion of Lucinda and Clitandro, which forms a rich lyric background for the contrasting humors of the piece. Besides this, we have

the ludicrous perturbations of poor Arnolfo, and the squabbles of the learned medicos (not so brilliant a work of comic genius, this cleverly schemed quartet, as the wonderful quintet of contentious Hebrews in Strauss's "Salome"). These various elements, passionate and gay, sentimental and satirical, have been handled with extraordinary skill, extraordinary art, by Signor Wolf-Ferrari. The score is full of delights for the connoisseur, the appreciator of fine and resourceful craftsmanship. And for the music-lover who has no interest in the intellectual side of a score there is much that will be happily remembered—as the charming scene in which Arnolfo seeks to beguile his love-sick daughter with gifts; as the truly delightful passage in the second act wherein are blended the love-making of Lucinda and Clitandro and the dialogue of Arnolfo and Lisetta over their game of chess, as the captivating wedding-music of the finale.

There is only one important trouble with Signor Wolf-Ferrari, and that is a fundamental one, difficult to cure: he is not over-scrupulous in his attitude toward his inspirations (we shall call them that for convenience). That is to say, he is too easily satisfied. For every composer who is not a genius of the first rank, the process of creating music must be largely one of rejection, if the issue is to be a score of distinction and consequence. The act of composition is almost the easiest thing in the world, for a musician of aptitude and training, if you are not too particular about the quality of the ideas you accept. The dividing-line between a musical idea that is salient, eloquent, unforgettable, and one that is trite and flat, is as narrow as a hair and as wide as the firmament. The pitch of a single note in the melody, the position of a single tone in the harmony, may make all the difference between a lifeless banality and an inspiration that will ravish the ear of the world forever. Now in the music of Signor Wolf-Ferrari there are, in spite of its refinement, its spirit, its effectiveness, and its great skill, far too many banalities—ideas without distinction, ideas that have been too casually accepted, ideas that have neither saliency nor beauty. "To every man," wrote the most poetic of philosophers, "there come noble thoughts that pass across his heart like great white birds." It is not easy to wait, patiently and in humbleness, for this inevitable transit; but for the few who do, the reward is immeasurable.

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